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The Therapeutic Prison:
Fieldwork experiences in American therapeutic communities

SUMMARY

The era of American prisons called "Big Houses" examined by the classics of prison sociology—Clemmer and Sykes—came to an end in the 1960s. The prisons, devoid of overt ethnic (gang) tensions, extensive drug markets and architectural differentiation (but based on low program activity—and most of all authority and conformity), gave way to the "correctional institutions" that changed the personalities of inmates. Today's "therapeutic prisons"—more specifically, "rehabilitation" programs based on the principles of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), as well as on the "criminal thinking patterns" hypothesis of Yochelson and Samenow—emphasise personal responsibility. As a first step in the therapy of transforming a "criminal", the "criminal self" is accepted by the participants as an ever-persisting "characteristic", and that identity is subject to change afterwards. A new element in the millennial "correctional institutions" is the interconnection of the cognitive behavioural therapy aimed at altering thoughts and the therapeutic community (TC) setting. While CBT ordains a perpetual monitoring of thoughts, the prisoners living together ceaselessly control each other's behaviour, overwriting the previously prevalent Convict Code ("Do your own time!"; "Don't snitch on your fellow inmate!").

Between December 2013 and April 2014, I had the opportunity to perform field work as an anthropologist in the therapeutic community of a Midwestern maximum security prison. The 181 prisoners in the Intensive Therapeutic Community (ITC) took part in a program helping to quit drugs and end "criminal lifestyle". Later, the state's Department of Corrections granted me further authorisation to spend an additional four months from April 2014 onwards in a therapeutic community established for sexual offenders (Sex Offender Program). The goal of both these field works was primarily to examine the therapeutic methods in prisons that have come into fashion during the 21st century, as well as their effects on the social systems of the convicted.

In my dissertation I thoroughly analyze the program tasks and self-technologies—e.g. the "rewriting" of the individual life path; the recognition of the "deviant, guilty individual"

instead of the interpretation of the "norm-breaking behaviour"; and identifying the manifestation of the "criminal self" in the smallest violations—with which the therapeutic communities seek to create the "criminal identity" and have it accepted among the participants. In relation to the self-theories underlying the therapy, multiple examples are mentioned regarding instances where the staff helps an individual to recognise himself as an agent in terms of the perpetration of his crimes through the pragmatic application of constructivist (cognitive and narrative psychological) and essentialist theories (concerning the "real self" and "masks"), without referring to other factors. Therapeutic communities mainly represent another asset of control over the inner operations and the—at least for cameras and guards—non-controllable behaviours of prisoners.

Contrary to normal prison settings (general population), TC aims to set up a new type of community (a Turnerian type of communitas between equal parties realised by denying previous status and positions). Despite these endeavours, based upon my personal experiences, the hierarchical structure of normal prison areas is also reproduced in therapeutic communities:

- In the Sex Offender Program, "enthusiasts" (prisoners committed to the program with no former knowledge of the world of criminal subcultures or the Con Code) are the most subordinated to the requirements of the program. "Players" are primarily motivated by the prospect of early release. The community of the latter—the "real cons"—despises sex offenders, who committed their crimes against juveniles/children, and simultaneously supports other "players" who they judge to belong to their group.

- In the ITC, relationships and social structures similar to the ones in the Sex Offender Program—and of course in the general population—can be witnessed. Former "tough guys" tend to keep off of sex offenders here as well (although not just from those who committed their crimes against juveniles or children). The reason behind the formation of small groups is completely different. "Former criminals" rank themselves in the group of "enthusiasts" dedicated to the program, while sex offenders get labelled as manipulative and interest-driven "players".